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ABSTRACT

The uncertain context of educational practice caused by reform proposals has created a dilemma for architects of educational-administration programs. If program designers do not respond positively to reform movements, they may fail to equip beginning administrators with the necessary knowledge and skills. On the other hand, if the preparation program is reformed but school reform is delayed, considerably modified, or fails to occur, the program will be subject to charges of irrelevancy and datedness. This paper outlines the new leadership skills critical not only to the implementation of reform recommendations but also to the success of both reforms and administrators. Administrator-education programs need to provide students with organizational structures within which the skills may be exercised. The paper advocates the use of problem-solving models and the intervention-assistance team model. It is recommended that educational-administration programs couple the new leadership skills to suitable organizational structures. Regardless of the organizational structures in which graduates find themselves as administrators, participation in a problem-solving team and learning problem-solving skills will help them in resolving fundamental educational issues. (Contains 16 references.) (LMI)

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A Structure for the Practice of New Leadership Skills:

Problem Solving Teams

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What is taught and learned through the experience of graduate programs in educational administration is the central reform issue for professors in those programs. Designers of the educational administration curriculum must heed critical voices from within educational administration as well as the greater educational reform movement. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration issued a sweeping indictment of the educational administration curriculum in the report, Improving the Preparation of School Administrators: an Agenda for Reform. The content of educational administration courses was described as "often irrelevant, outdated, and unchallenging" (p. 11). Meanwhile, proposals for restructuring the nation's schools have called for massive reorganization. An extreme example can be found in the recent announcement by a member of the Minnesota board of education calling for the abolition of the state's school districts, "It is time to destruct the district system" (Education Week, 1990).

Less drastic restructuring proposals, e.g., site-based management and district choice, that would cause still great changes in the administration of schools are receiving serious attention across the nation and have recently been implemented in some areas, such as the cities of Chicago, Miami, and the state of Kentucky. School reform in these regions and elsewhere, if the pattern of adoption widens, holds important implications for the successful practice of administration and, consequently, for the preparation of school administrators. Successful administrators of restructured schools will depend on a different knowledge base and employ a different pattern of leadership skills than those used by successful

administrators of traditionally organized schools.

The uncertain context of practice caused by reform proposals, however, creates a dilemma for architects of educational administration programs. If program designers do not respond positively to reform movements, then they fail to equip beginning administrators with the knowledge and skills needed to make the reform work and to be effective in the new world of school administration. On the other hand, if the preparation program is reformed, but school reform is delayed, considerably modified, or fails to occur, the charges of irrelevancy and datedness are proven by default.

New Leadership Skills

The need for new leadership skills is underscored by the observation made by Argyris and Schon that the skills needed by managers to implement organizational reforms that lead to greater employee participation and involvement are very rare (1977). As a result, many change efforts fail because managers lack the skills and understandings necessary for implementation (Bolman and Deal, 1984). One of the critical elements in the success of school reform, then, is the adequacy of the knowledge, skills, and values held by the participants for the different tasks and situations in which they find themselves. How well school administrators are equipped with the new leadership skills, then, is critical to not only the implementation of reform recommendations but also to the success of both the reforms and the administrators.

Conway (1990) asserts that the time has come "in which a new set of skills are needed, skills having to do with facilitating the involvement of teachers in 'self-managed' teams" (p. 153). The use of the adjective *new* deserves explanation. Most of the new

leadership skills are not new to professors of educational administration and their students. These skills and the rationale for their use are commonplace in educational administration curricula. Topics such as participative management, shared governance, and teacher empowerment are embedded in many educational administration programs. Despite the presence in the curriculum of both the concepts and the means to acquire the skills needed to apply them, the new leadership skills are not widely used by school administrators. Further, because these skills and the supporting theory are normative in nature, the presence of these skills may even be the source of some of the discontent with educational administration programs. What is clearly missing, however, and accounts for the infrequency of their practice in schools, is the lack of structure in which the skills may be exercised.

Skills and Structure

Formal organizational structures are defined by the regular patterns of human activity that express the relationships between and among roles (Robey, 1986). Individuals who occupy roles relate to one another through organizational structures. The discontinuity between skills-found-in-the-curriculum and skills-observed-in-practice can be attributed to the lack of compatible structures in which the skills can be practiced. The problem with the educational administration curriculum appears to lie with the inadequate coupling of skills to appropriate organizational structures rather than with the absence of relevancy, currency, and level of challenge in the curriculum.

The match of organizational structure and leader behavior is critical to both the success of the leader and the organization. Smith, Mazzarella, and Piele (1981) concluded that even highly skilled, charismatic leaders might fail if the structure was inappropriate.

Action and structure are complementary aspects of organizations. Attention must be given not only to the skills needed by administrators of the schools of the future, but also to the structure in which the skills can be practiced. The ability of the individual participants is vital, but a structure in which individual action can occur is equally important. A structure is a vehicle for action. The necessity for attention to both is captured in the paradoxical statement, "action requires structure, yet structure only exists through action (Van de Ven and Poole, 1988, p. 27). Structures need to be established in which action can occur. Such organizational structures allow the trial, rehearsal, and improvement of the requisite behaviors. Educational administration programs must continue to equip students with the new leadership skills, and must also see that students are able to create and maintain the organizational structures needed for the exercise of the skills.

If the skills thought to be needed for the restructured school are taught through the curriculum, but the students spend their career practicing in a school that is not restructured, then that portion of the curriculum will be irrelevant, indeed! On the contrary, if the curriculum does not provide them with the needed skills, and the students eventually practice in restructured schools, they will lack the skills needed for successful practice. An alternative to waiting for a stable future to arrive is to include the needed knowledge and skills *and* a flexible structure that can be implemented in nearly any schooling situation. Prospective educational administrators can learn to implement structural modifications that will provide them with an opportunity to practice the skills.

Problem Solving Models

Appropriate structural modifications do not need to be invented *de novo*, as existing

models can be readily identified. Joiner (1987) named task teams and employee involvement groups as types of structures that can be used to bring people together for solving problems in private sector organizations. These structures focus the expertise of members of the organization on the problem and involve the people who have the best knowledge about how the work should be done. Several problem-solving models have evolved in response to the organizational needs of schools over the years: intervention assistance teams (House, Zimmer, & McInerney; 1990); teacher collegial groups (Keedy, 1990); and principals' advisory councils, instructional support teams, and lead teacher committees (Hallinger & Richardson, 1988).

These models often provide an opportunity for the school administrator to refocus the attention of the faculty and staff of the school on essential organizational processes and purposes. These structures can be thought of as a window of opportunity through which the administrator can influence educational outcomes. The models temporarily allow teachers and other staff members to move nearer to the center of authority and, at the same time, often place the administrator closer to the teaching/learning process of the school. Skills in sharing decision-making, collaborating, and encouraging leadership in others are needed for optimal functioning of these models.

The double promise of the problem-solving team model has been largely overlooked thus far. It offers a channel for the practice of new leadership skills, and it has great potential as an instrument of school reform. Building-level problem-solving teams have been established in schools for a range of specific purposes and have much to offer toward surmounting obstacles to improved schooling. These teams can be used as the medium for

the practice of the leadership skills needed for the administration of restructured schools.

Intervention Assistance Team Model

Teams can consider general problems found in the school or may restrict their purview to specific problems such as student discipline or academic performance. The teacher assistance or intervention assistance team (IAT) is an example of a problem-solving team that attends to student behavioral and achievement problems. The team provides a vehicle for organizing building staff in collaborating on interventions that can assist teachers in responding to students with problems (Cosden, 1989). The process acts to broaden the scope of involvement and responsibility for problems of individual students. Essentially, the team is a formal group of teachers and other educational personnel that meet at the building level to analyze student problems and recommend specific solutions to them. The basic model of the IAT can be adapted for other group work in the school by narrowing or broadening the scope of problems considered. As an example, Graebner and Dobbs (1984) report a teacher assistance team in operation at a junior high school that provides confidential assistance on discipline-related cases referred by teachers. A team with a broader mission could be the primary means of providing instructional supervisory support to individual teachers (Sgan & Clark, 1986).

The IAT was developed to assist teachers in arriving at improved solutions to student problems and may result in a degree of teacher empowerment (House, Zimmer, and McInerney, 1990). It can also be seen, however, as an incremental organizational change that makes a structure available in which the new leadership skills can be realized. Although major structural reform is often suggested, and the problem solving team is clearly a marginal

structural change, the aims of restructuring are congruent with the intended outcomes of the problem solving team: to reduce teacher isolation, increase teacher self-perception of efficacy, increase interaction among teachers, and, most importantly, to improve student learning conditions.

Recommendation for Educational Administration Programs

Professors of educational administration should consider coupling the new leadership skills to suitable organizational structures. This option dissolves the dilemma of responding to school reform. It also sharpens the focus of process skills frequently included in educational administration programs. Because the structural element of the context for the practice of skills can be anticipated, professors can make better decisions about which skills should be included and what level of skill students should attain.

The adoption of this recommendation facilitates the design of an educational administration curriculum that anticipates and participates in restructuring, even in the face of an uncertain future for schooling organizations. The obvious alternative is to wait for the future to arrive and then react.

Students will need to understand the interrelationship between leadership skills and organizational structure, become familiar with modifications to organizational structure, and develop the skills and procedures required for successful implementation and operation. Once equipped with the capacity to implement such innovations as problem solving teams and act within them, students will benefit whether the eventual impact of the restructuring movement is great or small. Even if the call for restructuring falls on deaf ears and has little effect on schools, problem-solving teams still return benefits to the school. Conversely, if the

restructuring movement has a large impact and new leadership skills are needed by administrators, then school administrators who have been practicing the skills in a structure conducive to their use will be prepared.

Conclusion

Just as there seems to be little point to exhort students to practice participative management without providing them with the skills needed to do so, it seems pointless to equip students with philosophy and skills which are likely to be incompatible with the organizational structure in which they will practice. The skills required for action to empower others can only be practiced within an appropriate structure. If skills are not practiced, skills will diminish from disuse and eventually will be discarded. The problem solving team provides a structure that could involve the principal, teachers, other professionals, parents, community members, and perhaps even students in a collaborative problem-solving process on issues that lie at the heart of the schooling process. Educational administration professors need to include such accessible reforms in their programs, using specific examples and practice sessions.

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